GOD OF US ALL

The Fourth in an Advent Series of Sermons

December 18, 1988, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Scripture
Micah 5:2-5a
Matthew 1:18-25

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' - which means, God with us." Matthew 1:22, 23 (RSV)

Every year at about this time, exactly one week before Christmas, it seems that our culture undergoes the equivalent of a nervous breakdown. The circuits simply overload. There is simply too much going on. If you were courageous enough to venture out on to the Avenue yesterday, you know what I mean. It was brutal out there. People, it seemed to me, were particularly determined, heads tilting into the wind, shoulders hunched forward in a slight crouch, prepared to attack, a look of almost primal ferocity in their eyes... like Mike Singletary zeroing in on a quarterback. It was no day out there for a man on a cane, so I sat in my window and watched; my fifty yard line seat for Christmas on Michigan Avenue.

We will spend $700,000,000 on North Michigan Avenue this year, 40% of it this month. We Americans will gain an average of seven pounds per person over the holidays, Jane Pauley announced last week. And it seemed to me that we made real progress toward both objectives this weekend.

It's personal, too. Your schedule is probably creaking and groaning with the extra weight. At this point there doesn't appear to be the remotest possibility that all the cards will be addressed, presents purchased, wrapped and delivered, and parties attended. I hear my colleagues sighing a lot these days and I know what it means.

In an article in The Presbyterian Survey, Kenneth Gibble calls it "The Hectic Season," "the more-things-to-do-than-I-have-time-to-do-them-in-season" and goes on to say that it's symbolized by the last-minute Christmas crush at K-Mart. "I've gotten caught in it more than once, and I've learned that there is a good deal of the beast left in us... Anyone trying to jump the line at the cash register would be savagely attacked by shoppers willing to gouge, tear and maim. All with a perfectly clear conscience." And that's just K-Mart. Gibble has probably never been to the Banana Republic on December 17!

Every year at just this time I recall with great fondness an event which happened in our home years ago. The children were young and we had purchased one of those pressed-paper Nativity scenes which was to be punched out and "easily assembled," the package promised: "press out on line A, cut half-way to B, fold between C & D along the dotted line E, then insert in slot F." My youngest at the time and I sat down to do the job after dinner. It was pretty complicated. Before long, the table was cluttered with pressed paper: slightly bent sheep, cattle folded in the wrong places, shepherds who refused to stand up, and a tiny manger tilting precariously to starboard. He was about four at the time, and he surveyed the table top - the chaos we had created and asked... "Daddy, where is God in this mess?"

It is a great question. You can count on children, I have discovered, always to ask the great questions, the theologically profound questions. "Where do we go when we die? Who made God? Why?" And, "Where is God in this mess?"

In fact, it may be the quintessential question in the middle of this hectic season, one week before Christmas. Novelist and Chicago Tribune feature writer, Bill Granger, thinks people buy the Sunday paper because it's Sunday and they know you're supposed to do something special and, no longer going to church, they substitute walking to the drug store and carrying home five pounds of newspaper. So, maybe the frenzy of an American Christmas is precisely in reverse ratio to the theological content: that is, the less we believe - the more celebrating we do.

But that's the cynic talking. Maybe it's not that at all. Maybe there is a strong residue of faith (which we keep hidden for one reason or another) in us and Christmas touches it and calls it out of us. Maybe God is profoundly in the midst of this mess.

I began this series of Advent sermons on the topic of God by proposing that there are two important questions:

Is there a God? - and - Does it matter? The first is academic. The second is personal. The first is a matter of philosophy. The second is a matter of faith. The first is about ideas. The second is about following. We have thought about the God of creation - the God of the galaxies and mysterious universe - who made us all; and we believe, is still creating a world to reflect the divine image. We have thought about God of the outsiders, the oppressed, the captives, the poor, a God whose all-inclusive love embraces and takes sides with those who are shut out of the human family. And we thought about God of the lost who tugs at the hearts and minds and lives of those who have lost their way and live in a wilderness of despair, guilt, apathy and doubt. Today - God of us all.

Certainly, the question of God is on the human agenda with a new urgency today. One of the books that called the world's attention to Professor Hans Kung was entitled Does God Exist? I heard Hans Kung deliver a lecture in which he said that the biggest mistake the preacher makes on Sunday morning is assuming that all the people in the pews believe in God.

For the past several centuries, Kung points out, the most influential scholarly thinking regarded the question of God in particular, and religion in general, as irrelevant at best and, at worst, repressive and reactionary. Human enlightenment was synonymous with liberation from religion - the kind of religion that opposed Galileo, and democracy, and preferred exorcism to psychiatry.

That is over now - dramatically so. One of the reasons is that nothing has failed so utterly as the utopian, godless vision of Karl Marx. The resurgence of faith and the tenacity and vitality of the church in Marxist lands is acknowledged by all - even government authorities. There is far more to the human spirit than Sigmund Freud could explain. Science, of all things, has come full circle, peering out into an exploding universe and inviting the theologians back into the conversation about the beginnings and the meaning of human life.

If you are not stimulated to ask the question of God by modern science or psychology - the arts continue to pose it. This church engages in an annual Festival of the Arts precisely because even when the churches are silent, artists bear witness to the transcendent, the holy, mysterious and unexplainable in the middle of life. Even when they are not using a theologically correct vocabulary, they know and we know that the subject is God.

Jazz pianist, Dave Bruebeck divided his concert here between sacred and secular music. He said something eloquent and important, theologically, at the beginning of the jazz portion... "The cymbals are on the altar, where they belong."

The motif appears regularly in the best literature of the day. In John Updike's recent novel, S, Sarah Worth, a new Englander, becomes enamored of a Hindu religious leader and joins his commune in Arizona. In one of her letters to her husband, she writes:

> "You worship a stupid God, a stodgy, pudgy, god of respectability and outward appearance, a tin snob god of the 'right' causes and shoes and country clubs, of acceptable street addresses and the acquisitions that dissolve downward into junk..." [p. 62]

The question of God comes at us out of our own experience and the bewildering complexities and anomilies of life in this world. An earthquake strikes and 50,000 people die and we find ourselves asking the oldest theological question of all: Why? If God exists, how do things like this happen? We know that it isn't possible to retreat to the old arguments learned in Sunday School, or from popular mythology. It is not possible to blame all evil on human sin - or to attribute suffering to God's punishment. Even to imply that there is divine intent involved when babies die of leukemia or that the AIDS epidemic is God's judgment is blasphemous and even non-believers know it.

And so, if we are to believe in God at all, it must be in a way that takes very seriously our life in this world - our humanity, the human

condition; a way that includes God in the joys and tragedies of human life. If God exists it must in some way intimately connect with my life.

Again, the artists and writers know what the issue is. John Updike expresses it as one of his Jewish characters describes his wife's WASPish Episcopalian religion...

> "Many of her crowd went to church much as they faithfully played tennis and golf and attended rallies to keep out developers. Yet, their God, for all his colorful history and spangled attributes, lay above earth like a layer of icy cirrus, a tenacious and diffident other whose tendrils failed to entwine with fibrous blood and muscle." [Beck is Back, p. 115]

And along comes Christmas and the astonishing assertion that the child of Bethlehem was Emmanuel - God with us. In the middle of this hectic season and all the frenzied activities, it is a mysterious word which stretches our capacity to believe. This child, nestled at his mother's breast, is the God of the creation, God of the Outsider and the Lost, God of us all.

The name of this radical word is the Doctrine of the Incarnation. What it means is that in the life of one man, Jesus of Nazareth, God lived fully. What it means is that Christian thinking about God begins not with philosophic speculation but with a very particular human birth.

Christians have always pondered, discussed, argued and fought over this topic. How could he be human and divine? Was Jesus God, acting like a human being, or a very good person trying to act like God?

There was a time when I thought it was important for Christian people to grapple with Fourth century incarnational controversies about whether Jesus was of the same "essence" as God or was it the same "substance"? There is only a letter or two difference in the Greek words and seminary students lose a lot of sleep trying to remember which is which. Now I know better. Understanding is not the issue. I've lived long enough to know and acknowledge and enjoy the fact that there is a lot about life and beauty and love that I don't understand. Now I know that the urgent issue for us is not establishing a tightly reasoned theology, but finding some way to trust - live with a sense of wholeness, joy, security, i.e. salvation - and that means a relationship. You don't get that from people telling you things - you get it from relationships. When children ask the important, sometimes frightening questions, I have concluded that what they want is not so much a good answer, but a hug. The issue is a relationship with God. Now I know that all of it - the shepherds and the star, the Magi, the cattle and the sheep - all of it presents us with the most important claim in all of human history... God with us. In this birth... God of us all. God accessible to us... God close to us... God coming to us...

It is not an easy time to believe in God. Even the best of us have moments when the whole business seems remote. Instead of a joyful and satisfying sense of God's presence in life, we live with an emptiness, a vacuum, a vague dis-ease that perhaps we are alone and this brief life is

all there is. Christmas, the festival of the incarnation, invites us to include in our religion, to entrust to God, even our sense of aloneness. Think of it! In this child - this man - God is with us. And so, 33 years later, when this very man, alone, abandoned, near death, cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we come face to face with a profound mystery. Namely, that God is most present in precisely those moments when we feel God-forsaken.

On a wall in the Warsaw Ghetto was scratched a brave and poignant poem. It was written by a child.

"I believe in the sun, even if it does
not shine,
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if I do not see him."
[Hans Kung, Signposts for the Future, p. 164]

The birth of Jesus - is God with us. And so there is a whole new way of relating to God: no longer as a remote and frighteningly powerful deity, but as one who submitted to human life, who got into life with us. God with us - and so when suffering occurs to us, God feels it with us, weeps with us, stands shoulder to shoulder beside us.

The birth of Jesus is God with us; so our search for God has a whole new focus. Human life is where we meet God: not just in church, but all those places where we do our living: not just in worship and prayer - but as we work for a living, and as we enjoy the gift of our lives; as we love one another passionately and profoundly.

The birth of Jesus is God with us; how life is lived in this world becomes a matter of religious significance, distinctions between sacred and secular break down: God cares about life. Jesus, after all, was not a holy man by anyone's definition. He did not live in a monastery. He lived thoroughly in the world. He loved his family. He knew what it was to be tired and hungry and discouraged - and exhilarated, happy and full of passion. He argued with the authorities: he was arrested and tried and convicted on very worldly charges. All of that says that God cares about how life is lived in this world. God cares deeply about how people treat one another. God cares more about justice in South Africa than about religious orthodoxy. God cares more about hope in the Middle East, reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. inclining toward unity, and about integrity and compassion in the political life of our community - than about all the incarnation formulas in Christendom.

Finally - personally, intimately, because the birth of the Christ Child is God with us - because God chose this way to come to us (this modest, lovely and gentle intrusion into human history, a way we all share - human birth) you and I may live with a sense that we are loved, infinitely and completely by the God who created us. We can live with a saving sense that God is in this mess with us: in this vast and mysterious universe, and this bewildering and hectic life, we are not alone, not ever... There is one who comes to us in the midst of life - whose name is Emmanuel... God with us.

So, there is a week left. And you may or may not accomplish everything that simply must be done. Even if you don't -- particularly if you didn't - please remember that the festival is about a God who chooses to dwell with us...

- a God who values human life, loves human life and makes human life sacred - by coming to live it...

- a God who - in every age, in every city, in every circumstance - is Emmanuel.

"O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel."

Amen.